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SUPERSTITION IN THE LIGHT  
OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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## PLUTARCH'S CRITIQUE OF SUPERSTITION IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT\*

by

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The description in Romans 1:18ff. of the pagan religious cults as objects of God's wrath makes one wonder how the same subject-matter would appear in a non-Christian interpretation. Because of his close temporal proximity to the New Testament (he wrote one generation after Paul), and because he was the concluding encyclopedic figure of the New Testament era, Plutarch of Chaeronea seems especially apt to answer such a question. His treatise *On Superstition*<sup>1</sup> is, according to Schmid-Stählin,<sup>2</sup> characterized by a rather youthful tone. However, the question of how the ideas of this early work may compare with the mystical interests, the conservatism and the syncretism of his great later theological works (especially *De sera numinis vindicta* and *De Iside et Osiride*) cannot be discussed here.<sup>3</sup> First of all, we shall set forth, in a brief and free rendering, the train of thought of this tractate on superstition.

### I

1-2. Ignorance and misunderstanding in regard to the gods creates in hardened characters atheism, in sensitive ones, superstition. Atheism is bad judgment; its content is the denial of what is blessed and imperishable. It leads to apathy. The denial of the existence of the gods is intended to liberate man from the fear of them. Superstition, on the other hand, which reckons with the existence of the gods, but believes the gods to be a source of trouble and harm, is a form of illusion influenced by emotion. It creates fear in man, a fear which degrades him and wears him out. While the atheist

\*After a lifetime of research and teaching, Herbert Braun has revised one of his first essays for publication in English. The original paper was first read on 31 October 1947, and published under the title "Plutarchs Kritik am Aberglauben im Lichte des Neuen Testaments," in the series *Der Anfang*, No. 9 (Berlin: Verlag Haus und Schule, 1948). It was reprinted in Braun's *Gesammelte Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* (2nd ed., Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1967), pp. 120-135. The translation is by H. D. Betz and E. W. Smith, Jr. Quotations of Plutarch use the English translation of F. C. Babbitt, *Plutarch's Moralia* (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) 2, pp. 454-95. NT quotations use the *New English Bible*.

<sup>1</sup>De *superstitione*, in *Plutarchi Moralia* (eds. W. R. Paton and I. Wegehaupt; Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1925).

<sup>2</sup>Wilhelm von Christ, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur* (6th ed., ed. W. Schmid with O. Stählin; Munich: C. H. Beck, 1920), Part 2, 1, p. 491.

<sup>3</sup>Stählin/Schmid, pp. 512f.

has no relations with the divine, the superstitious man has improper relations with it. Misunderstanding leads the atheist to disbelief in the beneficial deity, while it leads the superstitious man beyond even this, to the illusion that the beneficial deity is harmful. Consequently, atheism is a false conception, while superstition is an emotion resulting from a false conception.

3. While other passions drive people to action, fear does not activate reason but makes it impotent. This becomes most apparent in regard to the fear of the superstitious man: he who fears the gods, fears everything. In the grip of this fear not even sleep offers forgetfulness, as it does to the slave, the prisoner and the sick. The superstitious man, when he awakes, looks for the soothsayer and undergoes repulsive rituals. He must be asked: "The gift of sleep which the gods bestow on us as a time of forgetfulness and respite from our ills; why do you make this an everlastingly painful torture-chamber for yourself, since your unhappy soul cannot run away to some other sleep?" For the superstitious man, reason dreams, while fear is always awake, and there is neither escape from it nor removal of it.

4. The enemy of tyranny can always flee into a democracy. "But as for the man who fears the rule of the gods as a sullen and inexorable despotism, where can he remove himself, where can he flee, what country can he find without gods, or what sea? Into what part of the universe shall you steal away and hide yourself, poor wretch, and believe you have escaped God?" The slave can change masters. "But superstition grants no such exchange; and to find a god whom he shall not fear is impossible for him who fears the gods of his fathers and his kin, who shudders at his saviours, and trembles with terror at those gentle gods from whom we ask wealth, welfare, peace, concord..." Thus superstition is a dreadful slavery, because it excludes the possibility of escape and apostasy from the gods. For the superstitious man the temple is a place of chastisement and punishment; not even death is the end of such a life, because he associates it with the concepts of unending terrors and punishments, and the image of judges and avengers.

5-6. The difference between atheism and superstition can be stated in this way: the atheist is blind and apathetic with regard to the gods; he totally overlooks their existence; he does not appreciate the beneficial, and does not perceive the good. This weighty ignorance of atheism is a great misfortune for the soul. Nevertheless one must prefer this blindness to the perverted views of superstition, because the superstitious man imagines the gods' benevolence to be frightful, their fatherliness to be tyrannical, their providential care to be harmful, their lack of wrath to be wild and bestial. He declines to see God's holiness together with goodness, his majesty together with benevolence and providence. Full of passion, he suspects the good of being evil, and lives in fear and terror with regard to the beneficent. He prays to the images of the gods which he has helped to create, but in his religious

practice he cannot overcome the contradiction between fear of the gods and flight to the gods, between flattery and scorn, between uttering prayers and making reproaches to them.

7-8. In case of misfortune the atheist, if he is not completely silent, blames chance and coincidence for mechanically bringing about unrighteousness, and for lack of providence. He traces illness back to his bad way of life and environment, and therefore does battle against misfortunes and seeks remedies. The superstitious man, however, seeks the source of misfortune in the god. He does not regard himself as having bad luck, but as being hated and forsaken by the god. He takes his suffering as the god's chastisement, punishment and beatings. Because he attributes his misfortune to the divine providence and command, he does not work against it. For he does not want to fight against the gods or resist the chastisement. His reactions to misfortune are propitiations in sackcloth and mud, confessions of all kinds of ritual transgressions, and at best the application of apotropaic magical charms. Because this superstition blinds and confuses rational thought, just when it is needed most, it makes many of the little evils in life all the worse. But the right course would be to pray to the gods as saviours, and then move to action, "for God is brave hope, not cowardly excuse."

9. In the convivial atmosphere of a cultic festival the atheist may sarcastically criticize the opinion that those cults have anything to do with the gods, but apart from this there is nothing to say against him. The superstitious man, however, spoils the joy of the celebration through his fear. He prays with quaking voice, and with trembling hands he sprinkles incense. His behavior combines the most miserable with the most wretched.

10-11. For these reasons superstition is a greater impiety than atheism. Superstitious delusions, according to which "the gods are rash, faithless, fickle, vengeful, cruel and easily offended," are bound to result in fear and hatred of gods, and in this way drive the superstitious man into enmity against the gods. The intensity of his religious activity is only evidence of this enmity. In the same manner despots are hated by their admirers. "The atheist thinks there are no gods; the superstitious man wishes there were none, but believes in them against his will; for he is afraid not to believe." And yet, he would most heartily welcome the attitude of the atheists as freedom. While the atheist has no part in superstition, the superstitious man by his preference would be an atheist, but is only too weak to hold those views about the gods which would fit his real desires.

12-13. Superstition is the reason for the development and for the, apparently justifiable, continuation of atheism. The cultic practices, saturated with ridiculous emotion, the dirty purifications, the repulsive propitiations (sacrifice of human beings) evoke the motto, "Better no gods at all than these

arrogant, petty, easily offended gods, who take pleasure in such forms of worship.”<sup>4</sup>

14. But this solution would throw out the baby with the bath water. Rather, the true worship of the gods is the golden mean between atheism and superstition.

## II

Plutarch's deity<sup>4</sup> is characterized by benevolence, fatherly love and care;<sup>5</sup> his holiness is coupled with goodness, his majesty with benevolence.<sup>6</sup> Hades is humane;<sup>7</sup> there are saviors to be called upon<sup>8</sup> who are kindly.<sup>9</sup> Man, if he acts bravely, may put his hopes on them.<sup>10</sup> But these gods do not punish, judge, cause trouble and harm. The whole system of punishment in Hades is an erroneous assumption.<sup>11</sup> Leto knows nothing of wrath and is not savage.<sup>12</sup> One must not regard the powers of benevolence as terrifying.<sup>13</sup> One must not change what is useful to man into an object of fear and trembling.<sup>14</sup> Superstition, which does this, is an emotion created by deceitful reasoning.<sup>15</sup> It is more impious than the denial that there is a deity, than atheism.<sup>16</sup> The superstitious man, with all his fear of divine punishment, makes life's little pains more painful than they really are.<sup>17</sup>

The New Testament has taken over its world-view from Jewish apocalypticism. At the imminent end of the world God, or Christ, will judge all mankind.<sup>18</sup> He will determine eternal punishments of bodily torment or irrevocably destroy those who are guilty.<sup>19</sup> He even punishes already in this life.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, by predestination he brings about man's final culpability.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Θεῖον (165 B; 167 E); mostly θεοί (passim), but also θεός (e.g., 166 D; 168 A; 169 C).

<sup>5</sup>167 D.

<sup>6</sup>167 E.

<sup>7</sup>171 D.

<sup>8</sup>166 D; 169 B.

<sup>9</sup>166 D-E.

<sup>10</sup>169 C.

<sup>11</sup>167 A; 165 B.

<sup>12</sup>170 C.

<sup>13</sup>167 D.

<sup>14</sup>167 E.

<sup>15</sup>165 C.

<sup>16</sup>169 F; 170 A-F.

<sup>17</sup>168 F.

<sup>18</sup>Matt 25:31ff.; Rom 2:5f.

<sup>19</sup>Rom 2:8f.; Matt 25:46.

<sup>20</sup>Rom 1:18ff.

<sup>21</sup>Mark 4:11f; Rom 9:18.

The difference between this view of God and Plutarch's is obvious. One should not minimize the difference by the observation, which is certainly correct, that certain descriptions of the deity attributed to the superstitious man by Plutarch cannot be found in the New Testament (namely, that the deity is faithless, fickle, vengeful, cruel, petty, easily offended).<sup>22</sup> For even in Hebrews God is regarded as the "devouring fire," and to fall into his hands is a terrible thing.<sup>23</sup>

More important is another consideration. In his pious fear, Plutarch's superstitious man is anxious to appease the angry and threatening gods. The god of the New Testament cannot be appeased in his wrath by any man. Man is regarded as incapable of doing that; moreover, he must not do it, for he does not need to do it. For, when Jesus fraternizes with "tax-collectors and sinners,"<sup>24</sup> he demonstrates that the punishing god does not punish, but turns to the lost ones with his infinite goodness. Also, in later, more developed Christology, Christ does not reconcile a god who is resistant, but God himself sends Jesus and, by his own initiative, brings about the reconciliation between himself and the world through Christ's reconciling death on the cross.<sup>25</sup> God, in a radical way, confirms his turning to man who is radically godless. This act of God is like a movement within God himself: God was angry but turned away from anger; and he who accepts this movement of God is no longer subject to the divine wrath.

Of course, we should not cover up the fact that both Plutarch and the New Testament speak of God in a mythical way. Plutarch's blessed gods, who only want to be friendly and beneficial to man, are as much a myth as the god of the New Testament and the movement within himself from wrath to the radical love of man. But when we consider the insight encoded in the myth we must ask: Where lies the deeper truth? Which decoded subject matter sounds out reality more adequately and deeply?

One might answer: the gods of Plutarch, who are not angry in the first place, represent a more mature and a more sympathetic level of thought than the god of the New Testament, who must first overcome his wrath. One may ask, therefore, whether Plutarch has not already arrived at the point towards which the New Testament tends to move?

If Plutarch's view of man, as pious and good, were representative of man's reality, then the never-angry gods of Plutarch would indeed be the more adequate myth. The wrath of the gods would be no more than a detrimental illusion, which is what Plutarch so emphatically points out to his readers. But in reality man is not like that. Man can be unfathomably evil. He does not live by his goodness. Rather he lives from the love which others

<sup>22</sup>170 D; 171 B.

<sup>23</sup>Heb 12:29; 10:31.

<sup>24</sup>Matt 11:19; Mark 2:16f.

<sup>25</sup>2 Cor 5:19.

give to him, but which is by no means to be taken for granted. He can live in peace with himself only when he does not deny his own wretchedness, but accepts himself as the wretch that he is. He lives by this self-acceptance which is by no means self-evident. Therefore, the myth of the change, by which the deity moves from wrath to love, the myth of the non-selfexplanatory, the myth of the revelatory character of the love of the deity, is the deeper and the more real myth. The wrath of God in the New Testament is a myth, but it is no more an illusion than is the infiniteness of love.

In fact, one could ask whether Plutarch himself suspects that one cannot overcome the fear of the superstitious man simply by calling it an illusion; "but if even the slightest ill befall him, he sits down and proceeds to construct, on the basis of his trouble, a fabric of harsh, momentous and practically unavoidable experiences which he must undergo, and he also loads himself with fears and frights, suspicions and trepidations . . ."<sup>26</sup> Despite the fictitious (for Plutarch) nature of divine punishment, he himself points out with passion the inexorable consequences with which superstition takes its course. "No fear of the sea has he who does not sail upon it, nor of war he who does not serve in the army, nor of highwaymen he who stays at home, nor of a blackmailer he who is poor, nor of envy he who holds no office, nor of earthquake he who is in Gaul, nor of the lightning-stroke he who is in Ethiopia; but he who fears the gods fears all things . . ."<sup>27</sup> This fear is not softened by sleep, but dreams drive the man, when he awakens, into the arms of the soothsayers and repulsive rituals. Once he has turned that belief in the gods, which should bring him forgetfulness and rest, into a steady and dreadful torment, his soul no longer has any chance to "run away to some other sleep, . . . but his reasoning power is sunk in dreams, his fear is ever wakeful, and there is no way of escape or removal."<sup>28</sup>

This tone of inescapability, with which superstition, as it were, immures itself in fear, continues throughout the tractate. "But as for the man who fears the rule of the gods as a sullen and inexorable despotism, where can he remove himself, where can he flee, what country can he find without gods, or what sea? Into what part of the universe shall you steal away and hide yourself, poor wretch, and believe that you have escaped God?"<sup>29</sup> Who among the readers of the New Testament would not immediately have the "wretched man"<sup>30</sup> before his eyes, who cannot escape from the law of sin, but who is taken captive by it?<sup>31</sup> The fact that he compulsively believes the

<sup>26</sup>168 A.

<sup>27</sup>165 D.

<sup>28</sup>166 C.

<sup>29</sup>166 D.

<sup>30</sup>Rom 7:24.

<sup>31</sup>Rom 7:25.

punishing gods to be inescapable<sup>32</sup> makes the situation of the superstitious man so terrible. Those harsh words against the Pharisees echo this: "Who warned you to escape from the coming retribution?"<sup>33</sup> "How can you escape being condemned to hell?"<sup>34</sup> When Plutarch assures us that "superstition is attended by emotion, . . . and by sore distress and disturbance and mental enslavement from the very beginning,"<sup>35</sup> who of us does not hear Paul implore the Galatians: "You stupid Galatians! You must have been bewitched. . . . During our minority we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe. . . ."<sup>36</sup> And when the superstitious man is portrayed as one who "loads himself with fears and frights, suspicions and trepidations"<sup>37</sup> who would not remember the Pauline "spirit of slavery leading. . . into a life of fear"?<sup>38</sup> In chapter 11 Plutarch presents the result of this horrible mechanism of compulsive fear: ". . . as a result, the superstitious man is bound to hate and fear the gods. Why not, since he thinks that the worst of his ills are due to them, and will be due to them in the future? As he hates and fears the gods, he is an enemy to them."<sup>39</sup> We read Paul saying: "For the outlook of the lower nature is enmity with God; it is not subject to the law of God," whereby the phrase "from which results the necessity" in Plutarch is echoed by the relentless statement of Paul "indeed it cannot be."<sup>40</sup> In addition, this description of superstition as a law of enslavement does not fail to point out the contradictions which entangle the superstitious man and his religious practice. "For the superstitious fear the gods, and flee to the gods for help; they flatter them and assail them with abuse, pray to them and blame them."<sup>41</sup> Plutarch must state: "the superstitious fare most miserably and wretchedly."<sup>42</sup> It is only a natural consequence when this identification of the contradictions culminates in the exposure of the hypocrisy that stems from weakness of character: "the superstitious man wishes there were no [gods], but believes in them against his will. . . ; the superstitious man by preference would be an atheist, but is too weak to hold the opinion about the gods which he wishes to hold."<sup>43</sup> Also in Paul's thought, the Law and the "flesh," whenever they are involved, produce the same strange contra-

<sup>32</sup>166 E.

<sup>33</sup>Matt 3:7.

<sup>34</sup>Matt 23:33.

<sup>35</sup>167 B.

<sup>36</sup>Gal 3:1; 4:3.

<sup>37</sup>168 A.

<sup>38</sup>Rom 8:15.

<sup>39</sup>170 D-E.

<sup>40</sup>Rom 8:7.

<sup>41</sup>167 E.

<sup>42</sup>169 E.

<sup>43</sup>170 F.

diction and conflict within man: "for what I do is not what I want to do, but what I detest;"<sup>44</sup> and: "[Flesh] sets its desires against the Spirit, while the Spirit fights against it. They are in conflict with one another, so that what you will to do you cannot do."<sup>45</sup>

At this point Plutarch lays hold of the inescapability of fear which characterizes human existence in general. Therefore, his advice to regard the punishing gods as an illusion is only weak advice, which is clearly inferior to his uncovering of the situation of superstitious man. The thoroughgoing way in which Plutarch describes the hopeless conditions of those who fear the punishments of the gods, destroys confidence in his advice. He is correct when he says that superstition in some cases turns into atheism, and that it would be better to have no deity than an evil one.<sup>46</sup> But Plutarch errs when he believes this is a liberation. For the atheist, too, may be afraid; he fears sheer nothingness, a fear which is no less terrible. Plutarch errs also, when he recommends as the true solution "true religion which lies between" (i.e. between superstition and atheism).<sup>47</sup> No friendly god saves a man where faith does not include both an acknowledgement of how much love he receives, again and again, and the ability to learn to live with himself, the evil and the unfortunate man that he is. Punishment by the deity as an interference in the affairs of this world is a myth—in that Plutarch is right. That is true equally of the punishment in Hades and of the final judgment of Jewish-Christian eschatology. But one cannot understand what these myths mean when one declares, as Plutarch does, that man's anxieties are unfounded. The mythological reasons provided by those who are full of fear, the anxious reference to the gods intervening by means of punishment, are illusions. But the situation of anxiety itself is not an illusion. In this non-metaphysical sense, not from outside of man's world, but nevertheless unexpectedly, Diana still lets fly her arrows. Only that man is free who is liberated to gratitude and who accepts himself together with his distress and anxiety. The Prodigal Son's experience—eating of pods and feedings of pigs—was in no way an illusion. But he was able to overcome his anxiety through the love which encountered him and through which he could be the person he was.

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<sup>44</sup>Rom 7:15.

<sup>45</sup>Gal 5:17.

<sup>46</sup>171 B.

<sup>47</sup>171 F.